

# The Vatican II

The Laity and Today's Challenges

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# General Introduction

Every member of the “people of God” – all the baptised in Christ ‘participate’ in the entirety of the ‘mission’<sup>1</sup> of the Church – that is, in the Church’s entire integral-ecclesiological life and its mission to the world.

This integral-ecclesiology developed in *Lumen gentium*, the dogmatic constitution on the Church constitutes the theological background of *Apostolicam actuositatem*, the decree on the apostolate of the Laity. It articulates the Church’s entire integral-ecclesiological life, in spite of inherent tensions in the document.

The acknowledgment of Vatican II, that the mission of the Laity has to be interpreted in the light of the integral-ecclesiological life of the Church in the world can only be fully understood in light of the complex history of the theology of the Laity which has its roots in: the gatherings in apostolic times, the Christian communities of the early centuries, the groups, movements, unions, fraternities and societies of the Middle Ages and the modern period, the activities of individuals and associations which, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup>, have supported and defended faith and morals, peace and justice in families, societies, social contexts and classes, at times even paying for this witness with their blood. The historical experience of the Laity as expressed in the Social movements before the Vatican II, associated with personalities as, Frédéric Ozanam, Uriah Stephens, Dorothy Day, Mary Harris Jones, known as “Mother Jones”, Albert de Mun and Rene de la Tour du Pin; Adolph Kolping, to mention but a few, leads to a deeper awareness of the challenge of the Laity apostolate in our time, today. A challenge that we articulate in this project by the key word, *testimonium* to deploy the word of the famed Leuven Church-Historian, Mathijs Lamberigts or ‘witnessing’ according to another Leuven Academia, Johan Verstraeten.

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1 M. H. WORK, “Laity”, in W. M. ABBOTT, (Gen. ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York, 1966, p. 486. “Although a “lay apostolate” has existed in the Church since the days of our Lord in Jerusalem, it was not until the Second Vatican Council that the Church’s official thinking on the matter was stated in a conciliar decree.” See, H. Sauer, “The Council Discovers the Laity” in G. Alberigo, (ed.), *History of Vatican II. Church As Communion. Third Period and Intersession. September 1964 – September 1965*, KOMONCHAK, J. A. (ed, English edition), Vol. IV, Maryknoll, Leuven, 2003, p. 235. “The Open acceptance of the lay apostolate by the hierarchy also militates against the prejudicial view that in the Catholic Church the laity are condemned to be passive.”

The advancement and prospect of today's challenges in different phases of human endeavour: socio-political, economic, and religio-moral etc, remain equally key challenges for the Church in general. Framed in a question-form: What does this mean for the mission of the Church in all spheres of life? What is the implication of this for the Laity in the world today? How can the movement of the Laity contribute to the common good and good Leadership in today's world? Connecting these concrete questions to the more fundamental theological question of the role of the Laity in the mission of the Church is the main focus of this work. Our main focus is an enquiry into the influences of the Social movements and Catholic Action; leading to the transition into the various Laity congresses (1950-1957) that saw the maturation of the 'Laity's theology' which influenced, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, the decree on the Lay apostolate of Vatican II Council.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter two we critically focus on the historical circumstances preceding Vatican II in the decree on the Laity, *Apostolicam actuositatem*. We start from the question how does this decree as influenced by prior documents like *Lumen gentium*<sup>3</sup> address the issue of Laity 'mission?' This is followed by a consideration of *Gaudium et spes* with reference to what it says about the mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World.

The third chapter focuses on critical evaluation of the mission of the Laity after Vatican II. Here the Vatican II's inauguration of the Pontifical Council for the Laity as a liaison between the Church and Laity is examined. A discourse on the Second Extraordinary Synod of Bishops 1985 followed. We took a further step

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2 This becomes very clear when one takes into cognisance the fact that persons like Msgr. G. Philips and Congar who took active part formulating the 'theology of the Laity' in the pre-Vatican II era featured prominently during the World Laity Congresses and finally found themselves working in the Theological Commission (TC hereafter) during the antepreparatory sessions of the Council. Although they were absent in the Commission for the Apostolate of the Laity (AL hereafter). See, J. KOMONCHAK, "The Struggle for the Council during the Preparation of Vatican II (1960-1962)", in G. ALBERIGO, (eds.) *et. alii. Announcing and Preparing Vatican II Council II: Toward a new Era in Catholicism*, Maryknoll, Leuven, 1995, p. 197.

3 Yves Congar is of the opinion on one hand that *Lumen Gentium* precedes and influences our decree, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* and on the other hand, *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* must be read in *pari passu* with our decree, hence the integration of these into our enquiry, especially the areas directly dealing on the mission of the laity in the Church and in the world; According to Congar then, "*Lumen gentium* must be read in connection with 'the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity and *Gaudium et spes* (itself, that is A.A., based on the constitution on the Church), they are on the same lines as the Catholic Action inaugurated by Pius XI. This involves no claim to power over society, but endeavours to act in society, to undertake that kind of non-violent action which we call influence, the chief instrument of which is bearing witness"; Cf. Y. CONGAR, "The Role of the Church in the Modern World" in H. VORGRIMLER (eds.), *et al. Commentary on the Vatican II. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, Vol. V., New York, p. 214.

to see a better theological framework for the role of the Laity in the Church and in the World based on the apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles laici* of John Paul II, which summarises the work of the Synod.

The Fourth Chapter focuses on the ‘mission-world’ as ‘milieu Divin’ – to which the Laity are called to participate in mission *ad intra* and *ad extra*. The onerous question: what can the Laity, the people of God do today in light of true witnessing in a more complex world of today? A mission to true witnessing – *testimonium* is clearly clarified and elaborated in the light of today’s ‘senses and insensibilities’ to deploy the words of Paul Lakeland.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Cf. P. LAKELAND, *Postmodernity. Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, Minneapolis, 1997.